



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume II: The Family in Art and Material Culture

The Inuit Family: A study of its history, beliefs, and images

Curriculum Unit 91.02.07
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Introduction

Selecting the Inuit family as a focus for study in the middle school art curriculum arose from my fascination with the objects and prints I viewed fifteen years ago in a small New York gallery of contemporary American Indian and Eskimo art. Since then I have responded to the images created by the Inuit, and used them indirectly as motivating factors in my own sculpture. This project has become a wonderful journey for me, which I hope will form a unit that will initiate the excitement of discovery in the study of an unfamiliar culture for my students.

This unit can be used by art teachers in grades five through eight as a starting point for the study of three-dimensional form. Parts of this unit might also be appropriately introduced in a Social Studies, Home Economic or Woodworking class. Although some of the materials suggested for the lesson may not be readily available, I will try to suggest alternatives to aid in the implementation of this unit for non-art disciplines.

This unit, structured by three major objectives, introduces background information and provides activities for classroom use. A set of slides accompanying this unit will be on file at the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute office, which you may borrow to introduce your students to the Inuit family.

The Inuit? Who are they?

Anthropologists classify them as Eskimo. I chose to use the word "Inuit" because "Eskimo" regard themselves as the race of the Inuit, which is to say "The People". The source of the word Eskimo has various etymological attributions: from an Algonquian word meaning "raw-meateaters", from early French missionaries meaning "the excommunicated", from the Norsemen meaning "little people-or from Indian neighbors speaking of them by the Indian appellation for foreigners meaning "snakes" or "enemies". ¹

Inuit, where do they live?

This unit will present a brief description of the three overall locations where Inuit live or have lived over an extremely long history. The focus will be on the Alaskan Inuit. As the forty-ninth state of the United States, Alaska as a subject for study can easily be introduced through the study of the Inuit. From my own experience in Social Studies, I found that geographic locations held little significance until I began to travel in my

adulthood. I hope that this unit, studying the Inuit through their images, will foster curiosity regarding the Inuit and Alaska in the first instance and perhaps the study of other cultures as well.

The Objectives of this Unit:

1. To understand the Inuit in terms of their geographic location and its influence on their way of life.
2. To investigate Inuit imagery as a reflection of their belief system.
3. To focus on the objects of the Inuit to introduce three-dimensional activities in the classroom.

Objective No. 1:

To understand the Inuit in terms of their geographic location and its influence on their way of life.

Background:

The Arctic of the Inuit “extends more than 4000 miles from the coast of eastern Greenland in the east to the fringes of Siberia in the west, northwards into the high Arctic Islands, and southwards to the tip of Greenland, the west coast of Hudson Bay, and Prince William Sound in Alaska.” ² (see fig.1 & 2, also Slide #1). Much of the wood used in the Arctic originated as driftwood brought to the Beaufort Sea by the Mackenzie River in northwest Canada and carried eastwards by the ocean currents. The Arctic has a short summer, when it is light for all or most of the time, and the land is not snowbound. The winter is long, and the darkness and ice close in.

The Inuit country is fearsomely unfamiliar. One can picture the people, but not the life of long dark winters and incredible cold, hardships, and dangers. Possibly even harder to understand is their incredible richness of colored imagery without an obvious palette in their monochromatic environment to derive inspiration from.

This brief background can lead to a discussion and activities centering around the concept of “contrast”, and how middle school students experience contrasts in their daily life.

(figure available in print form)

Questions for suggested discussion:

1. Imagine our world without cars, central heating, shopping centers, or modern technologies. What would be the most important thing you need for your survival?
2. Remember the tornado which struck New Haven, CT. in 1989? How were you affected by the sudden loss of electricity, transportation, or even your home? What resources did you use to combat the sudden loss?
3. Imagine your winter extended for ten months of the year. How would this affect the clothing you would purchase? How would you use your time inside for the major part of the year? Would your leisure activities be affected?
4. Now try to imagine yourself living in the Arctic of Alaska. By looking at the map of Alaska where

do you feel might be the best place to live? Explain why you chose your location.

From the discussion above, students will be able to begin thinking about a way of life different from their familiar environment. At this time it would be appropriate to introduce more of the background of the Inuit, specifically in the Alaskan Arctic.

It is established that the Inuit have been in their present Arctic homeland at least 2,500 years if not considerably longer. There is no definite answer as to which came first, the coastal or the inland Inuit. It's like asking that age old question: "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" This paper will focus on the Alaskan Inuit of the northwest coast.

Around the year AD 1000 the hunting of whales, especially the large bowhead whales which migrate northeastwards each spring through the narrow ice leads off the Alaskan Arctic coast, had crystallized into a specialized way of life for the Inuit among coastal communities.

To hunt whale and other sea mammals, the Inuit used kayaks (slide #2) and umiaks, open skin-covered boats up to 10 meters (33 feet) long, and in the winter they traveled by dog-sled. They established permanent coastal winter villages, which each included a number of substantial houses built of whale bones, logs and sods. ³

(see kayak-fig. 3; umiak-fig. 4; floor plan of inne—fig. 5)

A winter house in northwest coastal Alaska was called an "inne". Built underground during the summer months, the inne was a permanent dwelling. The inne had one doorway with steps leading down into the shed. The shed led in two directions, one to a passageway leading towards the main living area, and another towards a stormy day cook room. Cooking was normally done in the main living area under an open skylight to let the smoke out. During bad weather, to avoid the danger of wet bedding from the open skylight, a skin covering was drawn over the opening and weighted down, and food was prepared in the stormy day cook room. This room had a small opening in the roof to let smoke escape. Heavy skins hung in the doorways prevented excess smoke from entering the main living area. Furs were also hung close to all doorways to keep out cold. Each inne became a schoolroom in the evening as parents told their children legends and stories important for their understanding of the future, the preservation of the past, and a way to pass some time when there was no longer enough light to carry out detailed tasks. (Slides #3-4)

(figure available in print from)

In an Alaskan narrative, recorded by Edna Wildner, many details of preparing food and the running of an Inuit household can be of further interest here for a Home Economics or Social Studies class. (see bibliography)

Activity No.1

Objective To have students understand the basic purpose of the structure of their home through the study of the floor plan of the Inuit "inne".

Procedures

1. Having studied the floor plan of the inne, noting light and heat sources in particular, have the students draw a floor plan of their own home.
 - a. The floor plan should include; doorways, windows, skylights, steps, heating sources (vents or radiators) and labeling of the purpose of each room.
 - b. The students could make a preliminary drawing in class and may have to put final details through careful observation as a homework assignment.
2. Questions for discussion following the making of floor plans:
 - How many doorways are there to enter or exit your home?
 - What are the “natural light sources?”
 - Where are these sources located?
 - How much additional light is needed to make your home workable during daylight hours?
 - Where are the hallways located? How Many?
 - What are the methods you use to cool and heat your home?
3. Further Activity:

Having now thought about the purpose of why a structure is constructed by making floor plans of their own homes, students could then design floor plans for their ideal home. They should take into consideration their special needs and interests in their plan. They may want to design a plan for a particular room to accommodate their own family’s special interests.

Activity No.2

Objective To make a miniature kayak, umiak, or vessel for transportation which will float.

Procedures

1. Have students collect materials from their natural environment to create the frame of their floating miniature. Twigs, strong reeds from marshes, or flexible stems from plants could all be used successfully. Depending upon the level of manipulative skill, a student may decide to copy the structure of the kayak, or umiak; however, the need to create a vessel that floats may be challenging enough.
 - a. Twigs, etc. can be tied with thread or laced with reeds to create a frame.
 - b. A skin covering can be applied over the frame with whatever materials you may have available or the students collect from their environment.

- c. To make the vessel watertight, an acrylic polymer can be used as a final sealant. In place of acrylic polymer, Elmer's glue, applied with a brush, can function as a good sealant.
- d. The final test is to place all the vessels in water and see if they float.

Objective No.2

To investigate Inuit imagery as a reflection of their belief system.

Background Toward the end of the eighteenth century the Inuit began to have increasing contact with traders, explorers and missionaries. The family structure and belief system which is described below is that of the traditional Inuit before the influence of other cultures and beliefs, in particular Christianity.

The Alaskan coastal Inuit depended largely upon sea mammals for food and fuel, especially seals, whales, and walrus. If sufficient food were not taken during the warmer daylight months and preserved or stored for use in the winter months, starvation often ensued.

Inuit society was structured around the immediate family, plus the extended family of grandparents, cousins and other blood and marriage relationships comprising a family group with whom they lived in close proximity. All kinship relations, once established, remained in force until death. Whaling in particular required the cooperative efforts of the family group to hunt, skin, secure the food and make clothing. The interdependence of the family group was essential for survival.

The spiritual beliefs of the Inuit pervaded every aspect of their culture. They were shaped by their need to obtain food and to face the extreme and unpredictable forces in their environment. In *The Coming and Going of the Shaman* Jean Blodgett states: "The souls of animals and humans, the spirits, the "rest powers of the universe—all were things men had heard about in tales, were aware of from tangible evidence in their everyday lives, but which they neither fully understood nor controlled." ⁴ The shaman or "angakog" was the person in the family group able to connect with these supernatural spirits and exercise control over physical forces and events. The shaman use thought to have special mystical powers, able to solve problems, cure illness and act as mediator between man and the greater forces of the universe. Shamans held a central place in the Inuit culture. Although shamans could be evil as well as good, the first shamans arose specifically to help man. The position of shaman was open to all but only those with inherent "supernatural" faculty could become a shaman. This "supernatural" faculty "is usually identified later in life rather than as a birth endowed right. It was indicated by unusual circumstances or behavior. Jean Blodgett states: "Such incidents as sickness, accidents, dreams or visions, and strange events were taken as evidence of a person's proclivity for the role of shaman". ⁵

The role of shaman often passed from an older to a younger member of the family. There was an apprenticeship period from five to twelve years, during which time the apprentice was under special taboos or restrictions such as abstinence from eating the liver, head, heart or intestines, or having sexual relations. His training involved learning stories with information about the various techniques during ceremonies; instruction in taboos and religious observances; and learning magic prayers, songs and the sacred shaman language.

All things whether living or inanimate had spirits. In addition to the spirits inherent in objects, regions of the world were inhabited by local spirits singly or in groups. Sickness, death, bad hunting, or bad weather were viewed as caused by evil spirits. As a consequence the Inuit undertook to protect themselves against these evil spirits by the observance of certain customs and preventive measures such as special signs, offerings and taboos. When ordinary measures didn't prevent or alleviate disasters, the service of the shaman was sought. There were also helping spirits who aided the shaman, which could be in the form of animals, insects, objects and humans. These helpers were a source of power for the shaman, and it was through them that the shaman communicated with the forces that the Inuit believed ruled the universe. Shamans could be male and female, animal and human, all at the same time as is evidenced in carvings. (Slide # 5). One of the shaman's special abilities was to see himself as a skeleton, and apparently under special circumstances others could see the shaman's skeleton. It is not surprising therefore to see skeletal markings on objects made by the Inuit. ⁶ (Slide # 6).

Amulets had special powers to ward off evil forces or to endow the wearer with capabilities they ordinarily lacked. Any small object could function as an amulet; the physical entity of the amulet merely symbolized the power of the spirit it represented. (Slides #7-9). Whaling charms were kept on the boats of Alaskan hunters in order to bring them success in their whaling expedition. (Slide # 10). Personal charms were usually worn on a specific part of the body to be effective. They could be made of any material and were not always made by the shaman; however, only certain individuals with particular abilities could instill power in the amulet, and that person was most often the shaman.

Amulets were of invaluable assistance to the Inuit in virtually every activity. Children as well as adults used these charms, as it was felt children were especially vulnerable to the forces of the universe. ⁷

Activity No. 3

Objective To create charms or amulets representing powers, abilities, or characteristics one would like to have.

Procedures

1. Having discussed the background information and viewed the slides of Inuit amulets, students will create their own charms, keeping in mind that the objects should be representative of a "specific" characteristic they desire.

- a. The charms can be carved from soap with a dull knife; the point of wooden dowel sharpened with sandpaper can be used for delicate lines.

- b. If you have a ceramics program, you can break up air-hardened water base clay and give each student a small block to carve and sand into a form for their amulet. These can be bisque fired and glazed. Manganese dioxide is a black pigment which can be painted in the crevices and then sponged off the overall piece to create greater attention to surface engraving. These can then be glaze fired and strung on a key chain or neck chain which today for many students is a collection of charms.

2. Further Activity:

Boxes can also be made out of simple pine wood to create a box like the Inuit whalers made to hold their amulets. Since pine is such a soft wood students can engrave further markings on the surface of the box with a soft leaded pencil.

Objective No. 3

To focus on the objects of the Inuit to introduce three-dimensional activities, specifically masks, in the classroom.

Background *From explorer's records and the Inuit's own traditions, one can begin to see that all their objects had definite purpose. Religious, spiritual or practical ideas took on visual form. As stated earlier in this paper, all things animate and inanimate in the world of the Inuit possessed a spirit consequently a vast range of subject matter was possible.*

Inuit masks were used principally in ceremonies that honored and propitiated the spirits of game animals to assure hunting success. Each mask was the embodiment of a shaman's vision; from village to village these reflected an infinite variety of visions. A mask would often depict the shaman's trip to the spirit world. In a public dance the shaman would reenact his experiences to honor the spirits which were carved symbolically into the mask. Separate objects attached to or painted on the mask were representative of spirits of his dogs, kayak, hunting implements or anything that had been taken on the shaman's journey. (Slides #11-15).

When looking at the masks we can admire their fierce beauty; however it is important to remember that for the Inuit carver or performer there was a total preoccupation with making the mask acceptable to the specific spirits it represented. "The purpose of the masks was either apotropaic—to exorcise evil spirits and ward off misfortune of any kind that threatened the community—or to honor and appease the soul of game animals that had been killed, thus insuring a plentiful supply of food in the future."⁸

Activity No. 4

Objective To study an Inuit mask visually and apply a method of object analysis to understand better the Inuit culture.

(Note: This method is that exercised in the seminar "Art, Artifacts, and Material Culture" conducted by Dr. Jules David Prown at Yale University, see Bibliography: Prown, Jules David.)

Procedures I have elected to use this method on the mask shown in Slide #16; however I would suggest that you try the same method on any of the slides of masks accompanying this unit.

1. Physical Characteristics—
(The slide resource section will specify actual dimensions, when available.)
 - a. What size would you estimate this object may be?
 - b. What is its overall shape?
 - c. Do you think it would be heavy? Light?
2. Material—
From what material do you think this object was made?
What visual evidence do you have to support your observation?
3. Articulation of the Object—
What are the ways in which this object has been put together?
4. Content—
Name all the images which you recognize in this object.
5. Formal Analysis—
 - a. What are the major directions of the lines in the object?

b. What are the major shapes you see in the object? Are the shapes repeated? Many times? Few?

c. Which areas are the highest protrusions in space?

d. Which areas are the lowest recesses in space?

e. Describe the texture.

f. Are the colors high or low in intensity?

g. What colors are dominant?

h. Where is the highest value located?

i. Where is the lowest value located?

(note: The section on colors is brief as Slide #16 is in black and white. Please add questions which relate to your students understanding of color when using this analysis for the color slides.)

6. Deduction—

(Moves from the object itself to the relationship between the object and the perceiver.)

a. Sensory—Engagement

1) If you could run your hand over the surface of this object what texture might you feel?

2) Can you do anything with this object?

3) Would you want to use this object in some way?

- 4) How might you use this object?
- 5) What would it feel like if it covered your face?
- 6) Now would you keep it on?
- 7) How would you breathe?
- 8) Would you still be recognizable?
- 9) If people thought you were someone else, how might it affect your actions?
- 10) Do you ever wear masks?

b. Intellectual—Engagement

- 1) Does this object have a function?
- 2) If so, how might it be used?
- 3) Who would use it? Would you?

c. Emotional Response—

- 1) What do you feel in looking at this object?
- 2) What have you described previously from the questions asked that contributes towards the feeling you have towards this object?
- 3) Would it look different if worn by a person?
- 4) Would the effect be different if the person appeared suddenly? By daylight or at night by firelight? If accompanied by drums, rattles, music, shrieking?

d. Speculation—

“This is the summing up what has been learned from internal evidence of the object itself, turning those data over in one’s mind, developing theories that might explain the various effects observed and felt.” (see Bibliography: Prown, Jules David.)

(Note: At some point during the observation, the students may all agree that they are viewing a mask; however the word “object” has been used throughout so the students will decide at what point they are in agreement.)

Activity No. 5

Objective To create a mask that the student can wear as an extension of his/her self.

Procedures

1. Points to Consider: The Inuit masks were used in ceremonies. The students can decide on a ceremony or celebration they are familiar with to base their mask upon. If the entire class agrees to one particular ceremony or celebration, the possibilities to create a drama as a class or in small groups is endless. Suggested ceremonies or celebrations: marriage, birthday, funeral, holidays.
2. Materials: can be as varied as your resources.
Suggestions: planter, waterbased clay, styrofoam, pariscraft, soft irregular pieces of wood, wire, basketry reeds, thread, string.
Students can also bring materials they have at home or in the natural environment to create their mask.
3. A paper can be placed over the face and marked in pencil for approximate openings for eyes, nose, mouth.
4. The paper can then be used as a flat pattern for designing the overall shape of the mask. (The mask may or may not be designed to cover the entire face.)
5. The major portion of the mask can be sanded out of a cast plaster rectilinear shape or carved out of waterbased clay.
6. Reeds or wire can be used to encircle the mask and for adding the amulets made by the students in Activity No. 3. New or additional charms could be made by sanding small pieces of pine wood or plaster.
7. Holes can be drilled to facilitate the easy attachment of objects to one another with thread, wire, etc.
8. Have several mirrors and if possible a full length mirror to have students view themselves.

FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Alvin, *The American Heritage Book of Indians* , (1971), pp.270-271.
2. Susan M. Pearce, *Eskimo Carving* (UK:1985), p.9.
3. Barbara Lipton, *Survival: Life and Art of the Alaskan Eskimo* , (New Jersey: 1987), pp.16-33.
4. Jean Blodgett, *The Coming and Going of the Shaman: Eskimo Shamanism* , (Winnepeg, 1979), p.27.
5. Ibid.,p.34.
6. Ibid., pp.33-60.
7. Ibid.,pp.203-206.
8. Henry Collins, *The Far North* , (Washington D.C.:1973), p.16.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

* indicates student reading

Blotgett, Jean. *The Coming and Going of the Shaman: Eskimo Shamanism* . Winnepeg Art Gallery, 1979.

Excellent resource to understand the religion of the Inuit.

Coles, Robert. *The Last and First Eskimos* . New York Graphic Society. Boston, 1977.

Excellent reference to show students current photographs of the Inuit of today.

Collins, Henry B.; De Laguna, Frederica; Carpenter, Edmund; Stone, Peter. *The Far North* . National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. 1973.

Artistic achievements of Alaskan Inuit. Exhibition photos are excellent for further study of tools, clothing and masks.

Driscoll, Bernadette. *Uumajut. Animal Imagery in Inuit Art* . The Winnepeg Art Gallery, Winnepeg, Canada, 1985.

An exhibition of more recent work in the Arctic focusing on the beliefs of the Inuit.

Pitzhugh, William W. and Crowell, Aron. *Crossroads of Continents* . Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1968.

Exhibition catalog of extensive collection reflecting cultures of Siberia and Alaska.

*George, Jean Craighead. *Julie of the Wolves* . Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1972.

Children's novel.

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Chants and images from the Indians and Eskimos of North America.

Joseph, Alvin M. *The American Heritage Look of Indians* . American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1961.

Lipton, Barbara. *Survival: Life and Art of the Alaskan Eskimo* . The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey, 1977. Exhibition.

Good color plates. Excellent section on whaling, pp.25-29.

McDuff, Alistair; Galpin, George M. *Lords of the Stone* . Whitecap Books Ltd., North Vancouver, Canada, 1982 and 1983.

A beautiful collection of contemporary sculpture from major regions in the Arctic.

*Paulsen, Gary. *Dogsong* . Bradbury Press, New York, N.Y. 1985. Children's novel.

Pearce, Susan M. *Eskimo Carving* . Shire Publications Ltd., 1985.

A concise history of the emergence of Inuit carvers in the major areas of the vast Arctic region, pp.9-27 & 40-48.

Prown, Jules David. "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture, Theory and Method". Henry Francis Dupont Winterthur Museum, 1982.

Ritchie, Carson I.A. *Art of the Eskimo* . A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., Cranbury, New Jersey, 1972.

Good overview for research in origins, religions, dwellings, hunting costume, and ornamentation.

Swinton, George. *Sculpture of the Eskimo* . New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, Conn., 1972.

Good overall history and detailed description of construction of a kayak and umiak, pp.100-103.

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis Institute of Arts. *American Indian Art: Form and Tradition* . E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., New York, 1972.

Good section on the carvings of the Inuit, pp.93-97.

*Wildner, Edna. *Once Upon An Eskimo Time* . Alaska Northest Books, Anchorage. Bothell, 1987.

A one year cycle of Inuit life on the northwest coast of Alaska, as told to Ms. Wilder by her mother "Nedercook". An excellent resource for students as well as teachers.

SLIDE REFERENCE

(16 slides will be on file at the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute office for use with this unit.)

1. Map of Alaska.

2. Kayak Model—Crossroads of Continents, Plate 192. Ksyaks were constructed of light wood frames and covered with sea mammal skin.

3. Inuit "inne" exterior— *Crossroads of Continents* , Plate 247.

4. Inuit "inne" interior—same as above.

5. Mask— *Coming and Going of the Shaman* , Plate 129, p.17. Wood, metal, paint and feathers. 38.0 x 41.5 x 14.0.

6. Polar Bear, Central Arctic— *Sculpture of the Eskimo* , Plate 152, p.115. Dorset Culture (0-500 A.D.), Ivory carving, Height—6 1/8".

7. Birthing Amulet, Kodiak Is., Alaska. *Crossroads of Continents* , Plate 165. Two views of the same amulet-front/back. This amulet, decorated with human hair, is viewed as a symbol of fertility.

8. Amulets, Baker Lake, Canada. *The Coming and Going of the Shaman* , Plate 151, p.208. Musk-ox horn, sinew and caribou hoof, length of largest figure: 6.5.

9. Whaling Amulet, north Alaska. *Crossroads of Continents* , Plate 209. Displayed in the bow of an umiak (whaling boat).

10. Box of Whaling Charms, Point Barrow Alaska. *The Coming and Going of the Shaman* , Plate 155, p.211. Wood, quartz crystals, ivory, lead, garnets glass, sinew & string. 5.2 x 15.8 x 4.5.

11. Mask, Nunivak Island Alaska. *The Far North* , Plate 166, p.122. Wood, with red, green and black pigment, black feathers. 66 (26) high.

12 Mask, Lower Yukon. *The Far North* , Plate 170, p.126. wood, with red, green, black, vegetable fiber, gut strips, and rawhide strap. 77.5 (30 1/2) high.

13. Mask, central Alaska. *The Far North* , Plate 172, p.126. Wood, with red, black and white pigment, vegetable fiber, and twine. 61 (24) high.

14. Mask, southeastern Alaska. Princeton University Museum of Natural History. Wood, with blue, green, brown, white and black pigment, copper, animal skin, rawhide straps, nails and glue. Collected from a Shaman's grave. 24.7 (9 3/4) high.

15. Mask, Kokiak Island, Alaska. *Crossroads of Continents* , Plate 50.

16. Mask, western Alaska. *The Far North*, Plate 171, p.127. Wood with red, green, black and ochre pigment, willow bands, vegetable fiber, and gut strips. 48.5 (19 1/4) high.

(Figure available in print form)

FIG. 1: ARCTIC REGION—drawn by D. Platt, on the basis of Encyclopedia Britannica World Atlas (1957).

(Figure available in print form)

FIG. 2: ALASKA—drawn by D. Platt, on the basis of Encyclopedia Britannica World Atlas (1957).

(Figure available in print form)

FIG. 3: Drawn by D. Platt, based on plans, *Crossroads of Continents* , plate 192, see Bibliog.

(Figure available in print form)

FIG. 4: Drawn by D. Platt

FIG. 5: INUIT INNE FLOOR PLAN— drawn by D. Platt, based on plan, pg. xvii, *Once Upon An Eskimo Time* , see Bibliog.

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